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Boxer forced to travel to far-flung countries

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LAS VEGAS -- Yvonne Caples knows little about her next opponent, but assumes she'll need a knockout to win.

That's because her next fight, on Tuesday, is in Pyongyang, North Korea. And Caples doesn't think an American can win a favorable decision in a country President Bush has declared a member of the "axis of evil."

It's a familiar scenario for Caples (7-8-2). The 105-pound mini-flyweight has boxed in Guam, Japan, Trinidad, South Korea and Germany, but didn't win a single fight. She's also endured defeats in the United States fighting bigger opponents, a risk most boxers avoid unless a payday is at stake.

That is Caples' lot as a pro female fighter. To get bouts and gain experience, she must travel to the ends of the earth while male boxers can walk down the street to Mandalay Bay and the MGM Grand and compete for millions.

"She can't get a fight here," says her trainer, Leroy Caldwell. "The promoters here don't like to put on fights here unless they got a big name. It's a shame we got to go across the globe to get a fight when we got all these people here."

The 33-year-old Caples will fight Eun Soon Choi (2-0) in Pyongyang for a purse of \$6,000 - not bad in women's boxing, but pennies in the male ranks.

She has come to train at Las Vegas Boxing, a gritty gym just west of the Strip in an industrial area dotted with car repair shops and rundown apartments. The former IFBA Junior Flyweight champ, who was 13-4 as an amateur and won the 1999 National Golden Gloves championship, typifies a generation of female fighters who put in hours of training but often gain little recognition.

Unless you're Lucia Rijker, arguably the best female fighter in the world, who starred in Clint Eastwood's "Million Dollar Baby," or Laila Ali, the daughter of Muhammad Ali, the odds of a woman achieving success in boxing are long.

Before she retires in about a year or so and starts training amateur boxers, Caples would like to see something happen for the second time in her career - a bout in her backyard. She won her first and only fight in Las Vegas in April 2002.

“I’d love to fight here in Vegas,” she says. “I want the home crowd, too.”

Caldwell tells Caples to get ready to spar 12 rounds with five younger fighters, some half her age. All outweigh her, and the two boys she’ll face are clearly stronger.

Caples wraps her small hands and starts to throw straight lefts and rights, her feet moving like a ballerina on the battered cement floor of the former warehouse. She puts on her headgear and steps onto the uneven canvas, patched with duct tape and spattered with blood.

As Caldwell tucks in Caples’ hair and dabs petroleum jelly on her face, a black eye comes into focus, a reminder of the split decision she lost in Trinidad last month against Ria Ramnarine for the WIBA mini-flyweight title.

That decision was controversial, and this time - in North Korea - Caldwell vows not to leave the decision to the judges.

“We’re going for the knockout,” Caldwell explains. “That’s the only way we can win, so that’s what we’re going to do.”

Caples goes three rounds with a 14-year-old sparring partner, ducking most of his punches. Caples, an English teacher who started boxing at the University of California, has a crisp jab and solid defense.

“Don’t reach,” Caldwell chides her. “Step in. Double up on the jabs. Don’t get into no slugfest. We ain’t murdering no one today. Maybe when we get over there.”

Caples, a southpaw, lands a flurry of punches, including a big left. The 14-ounce gloves connect repeatedly on the teen’s smooth cheeks, and the young prospect is having trouble countering against the savvy Caples. She’s too quick and avoids getting caught on the ropes.

After three rounds, a fresh 15-year-old boy slips into the ring.

Caples, a little tired, has more difficulty evading his power shots, which thump her head repeatedly.

“She’ll take more shots here than in North Korea,” says Caldwell, unfazed.

It goes on for three more rounds, and afterward Caples acknowledges she took a beating. She is dripping in sweat, but she didn’t go down or stop boxing.

“She’s tough,” the 15-year-old says. “She’s not that big. I don’t know how she does it.”

After sparring with the two teenage boys, Caples controls the next three female fighters easily. Her stamina and conditioning give her a big edge. She could go for another 30 minutes.

Caldwell then sends her to hit the speed bag. The male boxers in the gym don't acknowledge her, and an uneasy tension hangs in the hot, thick air.

“They don't say nothin' to her. She don't say nothin' to them,” says Caldwell, whose 70 pro fights included bouts against heavyweights George Foreman and Ernie Shavers in 1971. “She does her job and goes home.”

Almost two hours later, Caples has finished a grueling set of sit-ups and push-ups, the muscles in her arms rippling and her T-shirt soaked with perspiration. Caldwell has worked her hard, but she's not sure this will be enough to win her fight Tuesday.

“I hope so,” she says.

Caldwell quickly corrects her.

“You know so,” he barks.